

Cooperative Conservation Initiative celebrates remarkable progress in first year

By Lindsay McClelland

THE COOPERATIVE Conservation Initiative (CCI) is a new program that seeks to strengthen citizen participation in conservation through partnership projects with U.S. Department of the Interior agencies. Congress appropriated nearly \$5 million to the National Park Service in FY 2003, the initiative's first year, to restore natural resources and establish or expand habitat for wildlife in national parks. At least 50% of project costs must be contributed by partners, including neighboring landowners, nonprofit organizations, local and state governments, corporations, and many individual volunteers. The National Park Service supported 74 projects with 200 partners in 2003, generating an additional \$8 million to benefit the parks.

Many CCI-funded projects targeted removal of invasive plants and reestablishment of native species. Melaleuca monocultures once infested 186 square miles (482 sq km) of Big Cypress National Preserve, Florida (see article, page 15). Initial treatment of about 14 million stems was recently completed. To keep the trees from recolonizing, the initiative and the State of Florida are funding hand-pulling and herbicide treatment in two large areas of the preserve. Another CCI project involves fighting three noxious weed species that have recently invaded riparian corridors in Lake Mead National Recreation Area, threatening to replace native vegetation and disrupt wildlife habitat. Project partners Clark County, Nevada, and the Southern Nevada Water Authority will provide matching funds to support the treatment of entire drainages to prevent the spread of these weeds to the whole Colorado River corridor.

CCI supported the expansion of a successful project to reestablish a nesting colony of Kemp's ridley sea turtles at Padre Island National Seashore, Texas, site of more than half of this turtle's documented nests in the United States (see related stories, pages 91–93). The grant will fund additional patrols to locate nest sites, and a new facility capable of incubating more eggs and releasing more hatchlings. Key partners include the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department, Shell Oil Company Foundation, Unilever (through the National Fish and Wildlife Foundation and the National Park Foundation), and more than 100 volunteers. CCI funds were also used to enhance turtle nesting habitat at Cumberland Island National Seashore, Georgia, and Hawaii Volcanoes National Park.

In partnership with the State and City of New York, CCI funds will help start a major restoration of the Jamaica Bay salt marsh in Gateway National Recreation Area, where substantial wetland loss has occurred. After the initial 2-acre (0.8-ha) project is completed, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers will restore 50 to 75 acres (20 to 30 ha) of salt-marsh habitat. Zoologists with natural heritage programs in Maryland and Virginia have identified four rare invertebrates in Potomac River Gorge springs and seeps within Chesapeake and Ohio Canal National Historical Park and George Washington Memorial Parkway. The seeps suffer from erosion, sedimentation, and toxins from nearby develop-

ment. With CCI funding, the parks and their partners, including American University; Arlington County, Virginia; The Nature Conservancy; and the Potomac Conservancy, will cooperate to restore vegetation buffers, reroute trails, improve parking areas, influence road maintenance practices, and reach out to nearby landowners.

The National Park Service manages some of the nation's most important bat habitat. In cooperation with numerous partners, including Bat Conservation International and U.S. Borax, Inc., CCI will help fund the construction of bat gates that ensure the safety of cave and mine openings in eight parks, while protecting habitat for bat hibernacula and maternity roosts.



Badlands National Park biologists Doug Albertson and Greg Schroeder take a blood sample from a captive swift fox prior to its release in the park.

Poaching eliminated the previously flourishing yellow lady's-slipper orchid from Mammoth Cave National Park, Kentucky. Restoration had been impractical because orchids are difficult to propagate, but scientists have recently learned that orchid seeds can be germinated in the laboratory and then transplanted. A self-sustaining orchid population that can also be a source of plants for restoration efforts in other parks will be established using CCI funding, more than 3,000 volunteer hours, and discounted orchids from the Vermont Ladyslipper Company, which specializes in laboratory-propagated lady's-slipper orchids.

Predator control and habitat change have eliminated the swift fox from most of the Great Plains. In partnership with the Turner Endangered Species Fund and South Dakota State University, CCI has helped to fund reintroduction of these housecat-sized carnivores to Badlands National Park, South Dakota (see article, page 76). Before releasing 30 swift foxes captured in Colorado, project scientists located areas where coyotes, important swift fox predators, are not abundant.

With strong support from the U.S. Department of the Interior and numerous partners, the CCI provides an important new opportunity for habitat restoration and enhancement throughout the National Park System. ■

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